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THE POWER TO FORGIVE.

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A SERMON

DELIVERED BY THE LATE

REV. JOHN A. GREYTER.

BEFORE THE

PRESBYTERY OF ORANGE,

AT WASHINGTON, N. C.,

DECEMBER, 1849.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THAT BODY.

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FAYETTEVILLE, N. C. :

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EXPLANATORY STATEMENT.

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THIS SERMON was originally delivered by special request of Orange Presbytery, before that Body, at its sessions in Washington, N. C., December, 1849. The impression produced on the minds of those who heard it on that occasion, was such as to create a desire that it might be preserved in a permanent form for the edification of the Church. If the life of the author had been spared, the sermon would, doubtless, have been prepared for the press, under his own direction. A constant succession of pastoral and pulpit duties, followed by a protracted illness, and closed by death in 1853, prevented the accomplishment of this work, in the lifetime of the author. The desire for its publication was by no means extinguished by that mournful event. In addition to the reasons previously existing, in the eloquence of the sermon, its profound reasoning, the importance of the doctrine, and its special adaptation to the times, a new motive was furnished by the natural and earnest desire which the author's friends felt for the possession of some memento of his great worth and usefulness.

The memory of JOHN A. GREYTER, is precious to the heart of the Presbyterian Church of North Carolina. In every relation of life, as Pastor, as Preacher, as Counsellor in our Ecclesiastical Courts, and as a friend, he was honored and beloved.

By a singular coincidence in the place, the Manuscripts of the Sermon were presented by Mrs. Greyter to the Presbytery at Washington, November, 1858.

The following minute was unanimously adopted :

"The Committee appointed to examine a Manuscript Sermon by the late Rev. JOHN A. GREYTER, on the "Power to Forgive," beg leave to report that they have examined the same, and find a good deal of difficulty in reading the manuscript, but have learned enough of the Sermon to conclude that it is worth the publishing, provided it can be done. Therefore

*Resolved*, That this Manuscript be placed in the hands of the Editors of the *North Carolina Presbyterian* to be published by them in their paper, and also in pamphlet form, provided they can do the author justice in so doing."

The publication has been subject to a brief delay, from the fact that the sermon was not complete in any one manuscript, and the Editors found it necessary to compare and compile from several. They have taken no liberties with the author's views or phraseology, and while to them their work has been a labor of love, they send forth the sermon from the Press with the prayer that its perusal may be greatly blessed in comforting and confirming the hearts of the people of God.



## SERMON.

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Matt. ix: 6, 7.—“But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith He to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house.”

Among the crowd which gathered around the person of Jesus of Nazareth in his journeyings in the land of his birth, the sacred writers frequently make mention of some separated from the rest by their bitterness towards him and his doctrines. These men, wrapped in an overweening conceit of their peculiar devotedness to God, could not brook the thought of being eclipsed by the superior lustre of another religious teacher as unpretending in his manners as he was ardent in his piety, and as illustrious in his deeds as he was obscure in his origin. These Pharisees, the learned Doctors of the law, (for it is of these I speak) with a jealous eye, watched his every motion, and stood ready to carp at all he did, and wrest all he said, if possible, to his destruction. Neither awed by his power, nor attracted by his wisdom, nor subdued by his beneficence, each successive manifestation of his more than human greatness, only goaded them on to fiercer hatred and more shameless opposition, till at length we hear them crying around the cross “if he be the Son of God let him come down.” Not a few of these men in pursuit of their victim had assembled at Capernaum and might have been seen seated quietly amid the despised Galileans—when a palsied man, all other mode of access barred by the pressure of the crowd, was let down by his friends from the roof of the house immediately at the feet of Jesus. This was a spectacle calculated to touch every heart in the vast crowd. Much more so would it affect the compassionate Jesus. He at once said to the poor paralytic—“Son, be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee.” Language

like this sounded strangely in the ears of the Doctors of the law, who said in their hearts, "Who is this that speaketh blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" And they secretly charged him with blasphemy. To convince them that he actually possessed the power which he pretended to exercise, and that their accusation was accordingly false, Jesus now spoke again to the palsied man bidding him take up his bed and go to his house, and the man was immediately enabled to obey the command.

It may seem a little remarkable, that our Lord should have noticed a charge brought against him, in this way. Though of a serious nature, it was entertained only in the bosoms of some of his hearers, and had he not brought it to light, it had probably never been known, save to those who preferred it. Yet it is obvious that according to the views of these men, Jesus had laid himself open to such a charge. In professedly exercising the authority to forgive sins he had assumed a prerogative of the Godhead—being a man, he had made himself equal with God. Besides, the secrecy of the accusation afforded him a fair opportunity of rectifying their false views relative to his true character. He read their very thoughts and thus proved himself to them, the great searcher of hearts and trier of the reins of the children of men. And yet farther, while exposing to public gaze the sentiments of these men that he might show their falsity, he was at the same moment extending the hand of mercy to the wretched man before him and rewarding the faith of friends so clearly exhibited in their efforts to bring the object of their solicitude in reach of his healing influence. Thus our Lord in vindicating himself from this charge gave to his hearers more exalted views of his character, confounded his enemies by a peculiar manifestation of his Godhead, and conferred a rich boon on a poor sinner who had sought his aid. It was worthy of him thus to notice it.

Again, we must not overlook the circumstance on which this accusation was founded. *This* was the language of Jesus addressed to the sick man, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee." The expression seems to be rather ambiguous. It may mean either "thy sins are forgiven," or "let thy sins be forgiven," i. e. the verb may be either in the indicative or imperative mood. In



the one case the phrase would be a simple declaration that his sins were forgiven—so Campbell understands it, and substitutes *are* for *be* in his translation. In the other it would be the efficacious word which secures forgiveness, manifesting the will of him who has the power to forgive—analogous to the word which said, “Let there be light and there was light.” Nor does the word in the original remove the ambiguity; it is a particular form of the verb which has given some difficulty to grammarians. Vater says it is the perfect pass., a form unknown to the Greeks. Bretschneider regard *sit* as an Ionic form for 2 Aor. middle, subj.

In the former it means “thy sins are” or “have been forgiven;” in the latter “let them be” &c. We find, however, that the Pharisees understood him as actually forgiving sins, for they said in their hearts, “Why doth this man *thus* speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only?” (Mark ii: 7.) This, however, does not *prove* that the expression used by our Lord was authoritative, but it does prove that an unconditional declaration of forgiveness is, so far as the individual himself who makes it is concerned, a daring invasion of the divine prerogative, and in all respects to his case, tantamount to an authoritative forgiveness. So thought the Pharisees and our Lord endorsed their opinion.

The course here pursued by our Lord in view of the umbrage taken by the Pharisees at his conduct is conclusive that he was willing at any rate to be regarded as having claimed the power to forgive. It follows then, in whichever way these words of our Lord be rendered that *an unconditional declaration of pardon to an individual* is an offence as heinous as that of claiming the full authority to forgive. Once more, we invite attention to the manner in which Jesus vindicated himself from the accusation of the Pharisees. “But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed and go unto thine house. And he arose and departed to his house.” Than this, we can conceive no surer proof of unlimited power. The word which speaks, and it stands fast, is not only a word of power, but it is the word of the Creator. The being, between whose declared will, and the effect produced, there is no intermediate circumstance, and no intervening conceivable time, is the Being, who is girded with Omnipotence.

He who wills and it is done; whose *fiat* instantly secures the result aimed at, is and must be to our conceptions the Lord God Almighty. There is no more certain indication of Almightyness than this. There may be brighter and more dazzling coruscations of this glorious perfection in yon world of glory, which sin has never darkened; there may be here on earth more overpowering exhibitions, but there are none which can more surely certify us of the presence of the arm which none can resist. He then who says to a paralytic, "Arise and take up thy bed and go to thine house," when instantly the man in view of all around arises and walks; this one, man though he seem to be and though he actually be, must at the same time be clothed with the power of doing whatever he pleaseth. If this be not a manifestation of Omnipotence, there can none be given to us: then is all distinction between the Infinite and finite annihilated to our view. Let us now return to the history. It is admitted on all hands that Jesus on this occasion gave evidence that he had power to forgive sins on earth. "Here was an ocular demonstration" says Dr. Campbell, "of the power with which the order was accompanied, and therefore was entirely fit for serving as evidence that the other expression he had used, "thy sins be forgiven thee" was not vain words, but attended with the like divine energy, though from its nature, not discernible like the other by its consequences. To say the one with effect, where effect was visible, is a proof that the other was said also with effect, though the effect itself was invisible." Again it will not be denied that Jesus here also showed himself to be one with the Father, equal in power and glory. If now it be farther taken into consideration that this manifestation of divine glory so clearly evidencing our Lord to be at the same time God and to have power to forgive sins on earth, was given to clear himself in the eyes of the Pharisees, who had said that none can forgive sins but God only,—the conclusion is almost irresistible, that Jesus meant to sanction the truth of the doctrine on which these men had proceeded. In other words, Jesus here showed himself to be God. For what purpose? That he might prove he had power to forgive sins on earth. Was the proof sufficient? It is not denied. Was it necessary? Would not an evidence short of this have answered every purpose? Was it essential to prove his Godhead to con-

vince his hearers that he had made no false pretensions! To this we reply that it was certainly necessary, so long as the Pharisees maintained the views they then held—that none but God can forgive sins. Were they in error on this point? The presumption is, they were not, otherwise Jesus would have corrected that error. All correct apprehensions of his character forbid the belief that our Lord would have thus manifested his glory, if the same end could have been reached without it, and that in the exercise of this discretionary power, he declares his righteousness that he may be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. These are truths written so legibly and so frequently in the glorious gospel of the Son of God, and so unspeakably precious to poor sinners, that we may for the present assume them as undeniable and not stop to establish them. But that God only can forgive sins—that the power of forgiveness is not only inherent in him, but reserved entirely in his own hands, is a point which some deny and we affirm. This point will form the subject of the present discussion.

However clear may be the fact that powers of the highest offices may be and continually are delegated to others—yet it is obvious that there must be a limit somewhere—there must be some prerogative peculiar to the Sovereign and reserved in his own hands, which cannot be transferred—otherwise all distinction between the supreme and inferior power is confounded.

Lord Bacon in some excellent remarks on this subject, has pointed out this limit, as it seems to us, in the clearest manner. He regards the prerogative in two distinct branches. In the one the King's pleasure is reserved in the Sovereign's hands to be exercised in each case according to his personal and private discretion. According to this distinction it is obvious not only that there is a prerogative which cannot possibly be transferred, but the reason why is equally manifest. A prerogative entirely controlled in every case by the private pleasure of the sovereign must from its very nature be incommunicable, because, 1st. the private pleasure of no man can become that of another, and 2nd, because if it were possible, such a transfer invests a subject with a power to rule his fellow subjects according to his own pleasure, i. e. makes him most absolute sovereign.

These remarks apply with much more force and truth to the

Jehovah of the Scriptures, the King of kings and Lord of lords—the Blessed and only Potentate—doing his will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. It were preposterous to suppose that in a Sovereign wielding such a sceptre, there were no powers in themselves inalienable or none which a creature is totally unable to wield. Besides, a divine prerogative in some of its branches may require for its execution, the presence of some of the distinguishing attributes of the Godhead, and cannot accordingly be delegated to another without confounding the distinctions between the Infinite and the finite—the Creator and the creature. The exercise of the power may involve the presence of attributes, the transference of which is the investiture of the being to whom they are transferred with the distinguishing excellency of the great God. And if these distinctive perfections may be bestowed on another who is not God, how can the Holy One manifest himself to his creatures so as to be known from and above them all?

The possession of the divine excellency is to us the evidence of his presence and agency; the manifestation of those attributes which constitute the divine excellency must then prove that the Being in whom they shone forth is God and not another. Omnipotence, for example, belongs to God alone. He who can do whatever he pleaseth in heaven or on earth, for whom nothing is too hard, he can be none other than the Lofty One, who inhabits the praises of eternity. This is an attribute, whose presence defines to our faith the Being who made and upholds us, and to whom we are bound to render our highest services. Again: To search the heart and try the reins of men is another perfection of the Deity. “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord, search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.” If then the Scriptures are our rule in faith and practice, he who discerns the thoughts and intents of my heart is Jehovah, and as often as he does this, he calls me to own and acknowledge him as the only true God. These and others which might be mentioned are, what have been called by an old divine, so many royalties of the divine nature—such as no creature can share in. He who is clothed with these is *He*, whom we need not fear to worship as

the Lord God. Though to the eye he may seem to be man, yet if he is girded with Omnipotence, infinite in knowledge &c., he is our Immanuel, God in the flesh. Such indeed was Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man in outward appearance. He was encompassed with all the infirmities of our nature. And when he claimed to be God, the thought seemed almost incredible. Strange indeed was it that one like ourselves should claim to be the God who made us. Yet he proved himself to be all he claimed to be—he showed his fearless majesty in the displays of the distinguishing perfections of the Godhead he put forth. Thus we know him to be our God and Saviour. The indwelling of the divine excellency leaves no doubt on this point. “The word was made flesh and dwelt among us” says John, “and we beheld his glory, as the glory of the only begotten Son of God.” We see then that a divine prerogative may be limited in reference to its exercise by any other, both from its nature and its requiring in its execution the presence of such attributes as cannot be committed without breaking down the enclosure which separates the Great I AM from the creatures of his hands. And the question we now wish to settle is whether the power to forgive sins is such a prerogative.

In order to reach a satisfactory answer to this inquiry, let us for a few moments consider what we are to understand by the forgiveness of sins. This will prepare the way for our entrance on another enquiry: what is implied in the power to forgive? from which it will be comparatively easy to return a categorical reply to our main question.

#### 1. What is forgiveness of sins?

“Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.” It accordingly implies a moral agent, a law, and a lawgiver. It may therefore be regarded in these three different relations, in each of which it presents a different and important aspect. Considered simply in reference to the agent, the sins of an individual are nothing more than his thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds, and form but just so many items or facts in the records of his history, or to use the language of Scripture in “the Book of God’s remembrance.” Here they are “written with a pen of iron and with the point of a diamond”—here they must ever preserve their place, and are of course imperishable and indestructible. In relation to the law, the standard of right

and wrong, sin is a deflection from the mark it sets up, a deviation from the path it defines. This constitutes its sinfulness and gives rise to its ill desert. The law of God being holy and just and good, every violation of its injunctions or departure from its requisitions must be evil in itself, and attach moral turpitude to him who is chargeable with such violation. This law being further inflexible and immutable in its demands, this feature must be an inseparable adjunct of sin. The sinner then deserves to perish, and will forever deserve to perish, if dealt with according to his personal deserts. Again, the Lawgiver, being the vindicator and guardian of law, and the law binding to obedience and in default thereof to punishment, there arises another important aspect of sin, as laying the individual chargeable with it, under *obligations* to suffer at the hands of the Lawgiver. In this aspect sin is a debt of suffering which the sinner owes God, as the avenger of the claims of his law. So our Lord has taught us to regard it in the prayer he has given us as the model to which our petitions should be conformed. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." This debt, however, is simply a legal claim, and if that claim can be otherwise satisfied than by the personal suffering of the sinner, it is obvious that this obligation will no more remain. This obligation to suffering arising out of sin, called in technical language guilt, is a feature, though not inseparable from it.

Thus we see there are three views of sin distinguishable and distinct from each other, viz: the act, its sinfulness and its guilt, or the liability to suffer which it induces in the agent, and of these only one can be separated from it. But as we are anxious to be fully understood, we will illustrate what has been said by an example taken from human law. We will suppose that a man having killed another, is arraigned on the charge of murder. The first inquiry will be into the fact. Did he commit the act? Did he kill the individual supposed? This is a preliminary step which cannot be dispensed with, and brings the crime before the view of all concerned, simply as a deed or act on his part. This, however, being settled and the deed proved to have been committed by him, it does not necessarily follow that he is a murderer, or in other words that he is criminal. This point requires a separate investigation and is to be decided

by the voice of the law. He is to be brought, as it were, along side the law and viewed in the light which it sheds upon him. If then, though a competent number of witnesses shall have declared that he committed the act, it shall be seen that he did it in self-defence or accidentally, the law attaches no criminality to the deed, and the man is declared innocent, he has not violated the law. Supposing however, he has killed his neighbor with malice aforethought, and thus in the eye of the law, deserves to suffer, there is yet another step to be taken. Sentence must be pronounced by him, who appears as the guardian and upholder of the law. This sentence is but the authoritative voice of the law fastening on the head of the criminal the obligation of punishment. He is liable to death. But this liability to suffer—a legal obligation to punishment—may be removed by the interposition of the executive or monarch. In the exercise of his supreme power, he may put forth his arm between the law and the head of the criminal and set aside this obligation. The man then, though he killed his neighbor, and in so doing violated the law and was exposed to punishment, goes unpunished. No one can molest him. In this process we see three different steps—each one bringing the crime into different relations and consequently presenting it in different aspects as a deed, its criminality and the obligation to punishment. The first two are necessary to constitute it a crime, and in this light cannot be separated from it—the last may or may not abide in connection with it even as a crime. Who can doubt that the matter of Uriah the Hittite is truly as blameworthy, as base now, as it was when Israel's king under the lashes of an awakened conscience cried out in anguish, "Deliver me, O God from blood guiltiness?" Who doubts that it will be as true, and as vile in all the rolling ages of eternity, and that David will never be able to stand before the throne of God on the ground of his personal deserts? Yet David's blood guiltiness has been removed and Uriah's murderer lives—he lives in triumph and glory.

Let this illustration suffice to show, that there is one and only one element of sin, which is capable of being separated from it, and this is its guilt. This, we think, must appear obvious to all on reflection. In reference to sins which are registered among the deeds which are past, no one can suppose that they shall

ever be blotted out. They must forever abide in the presence of *Him*, with whom there is no past. Nor can we for a moment believe that their sinfulness will be separated from them, for this is an essential element of their nature as sins. Take the sinfulness out and they are no more sins. Unless then the lapse of ages shall make that which was once sinful no longer so—or unless the Law of God shall be changed—then this element must abide. There remains then as we have seen only the obligation to suffer which sin fastens on the agent, which can be removed. The taking this obligation to punishment off from the head of the sinner, or the removal of his guilt, in consequence of which under the government of God, no punishment, though deserved, will or can follow, is what we mean by the *forgiveness of sins*. This essential view of forgiveness is too frequently presented in the Scriptures to escape the notice of any who read them understandingly. Certainly no idea was more familiar to the Jews than that of the transference of his obligation to suffer in consequence of sin, to the head of a victim, which because of this transference suffered in his place. When he brought his victim to the altar, he was required to lay his hands on its head and confess his sins, then having slain the victim—the animal suffered in his place—he went away guiltless. Atonement was made for him, his sin was forgiven. These victims prefigured “the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world,” and according to the peculiar polity of the Jews, according to which every offence incurred the penalty of death, were accepted as substitutes in the place of the offenders. The idea however of cancelling guilt was prominent in their minds in all aspects. Laying the hands on the head of the animal, confessing sins and then slaying the victim, were all significant of a passing over of something on the part of the offender from him to an innocent creature, in consequence of which that creature must die. That something which is thus transferred, is that which renders it proper in the eye of the law, that the innocent should suffer which is guilt. This being put on the head of another, we see at once why it should die according to law. Now according to the method of salvation revealed in the Scriptures, this obligation to suffering is not removed from the sinner by a sovereign act setting aside the claims of the law—but by a judicial act



upholding its utmost rigors by declaring it to be fully satisfied in his case. This is the peculiarity of the scheme of redemption. This is its exceeding glory. The sinner is not simply pardoned, he is justified—pronounced to be just in the eye of the law. The law is not disregarded, but its honor vindicated and magnified. All its claims are acknowledged and satisfied, and therefore no more rest on the sinner. And the Lawgiver himself stands forth to view as the just, yet the justifier of the ungodly. All this however presupposes a sufficient satisfaction made to the law for sinners, which in each case of forgiveness is reckoned to the individual. In consequence of this imputation of a righteousness to him, the sinner himself becomes righteous and there is no more condemnation to him. His sins are covered and can no more rise up against him. God has bestowed upon him the righteousness of his Son and the gift of faith whereby he has received this righteousness. “Blessed is he,” says David, “whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.” Paul tells us that David is here describing the blessedness of the man to whom God imputeth righteousness without works. Thus we are taught that transgression when forgiven is covered and no more imputed—and it is covered by a righteousness without works on the part of the sinner, a righteousness which God imputes to him. It is important here to observe that in this procedure God has done two things for the pardoned sinner. He has officially declared him to be righteous and free from all demands of the law. He has also reckoned to him a righteousness which is not his own by works but which has become his through the faith of Jesus. In the one of these God has proceeded on his own previous act, i. e. in pronouncing the sinner just—he has done so because of the previous imputation to him of the righteousness set forth in the Gospel—the full satisfaction made to the law in the person of Jesus Christ.

Such we believe to be the scriptural view of forgiveness. Let us now attentively consider it for a few moments—that we may discern the nature of the act itself. I observe then,

1. Forgiveness is an act of supremacy. As has been already mentioned, there are in each act of forgiveness two acts implied,

separate from each other, because in each God appears in a different capacity, yet both concurring, and necessary to the same result. In the one, God shows himself the judge giving utterance to the declaration of the law; in the other, he proceeds as a sovereign conferring the most precious gift on an undeserving wretch. But for this gift instead of justifying the sinner, the judge would have demanded the awful sentence of the law—everlasting death as abiding upon him. Thus by an act in his sovereign capacity, he reverses what he would have done in the other. He turns the sentence of the law away from the poor wretch and fastens its claims upon another. This is most clearly the exercise of a prerogative above law. For why does not the law still maintain its claims, and demand the punishment of the sinner? He has violated its precepts. He has incurred its penalty. Its condemnatory voice was lifted up against him, and conscience echoed back that voice. But suddenly all is changed; there is now no more condemnation. The Judge whose duty it is to vindicate the law and enforce its sanctions, pronounces sentence of acquittal and acceptance. Why is this? Because of an act which has not set aside the claims of the law, but has fixed them on another, in whom they were all satisfied. This then, though not against law, nor regardless of law, is plainly an act above law. It is the highest act of government. We can conceive of no higher stretch of dominion; it is an act of supremacy.

“The law binds first to obedience and in neglect of it to punishment. Not only the lusts that break forth are evidence of, but inward inclinations contrary to the law are, sin. From hence results a guilt upon every sinner, which includes the imputation of the fault and obligation to punishment.

The forgiveness of sins contains the obligation of their guilt and freedom from the deserved destruction consequent to it. This is expressed by various terms in Scripture. The ‘not imputing sin’ is borrowed from the accounts of servants with their masters, and implies the account we are obliged to render the supreme Lord for all his benefits which we have so wretchedly misimproved; he might righteously exact of us ten thousand talents as due to him, but he is graciously pleased to cross the book and freely to discharge us. ‘The purging from sin’ implies it is

very odious and offensive in God's eyes, and has a special respect to the expiatory sacrifices, of which it is said, that "without blood there was no remission."

It is the high prerogative of God to pardon sin. His authority made the law, and gives life and vigor to it, therefore he can remit the punishment of the offender.

This royal supremacy is more conspicuous in the exercise of mercy towards repenting sinners, than in the acts of justice upon obstinate offenders. As a king is more a king by pardoning humble suppliants by the operation of his sceptre, than in subduing rebels by the power of the sword, for in acts of grace he is above the law, and overrules its rigor, in acts of vengeance, he is only superior to his enemies \* \* \* It is the peculiar prerogative of God to pardon sin, for it is an act of empire. The judicial power to pardon is a flower inseparable from the crown, for it is founded in a superiority to the law, therefore inconsistent with any depending authority. The power to pardon is an efflux of supremacy and incommunicable to the subject. A prince that invests another with absolute power to pardon, must either relinquish his sovereignty, or take an associate to share it. It is not presumable that the wise God should invest men with that authority which they are utterly incapable of exercising.

Grace is exclusive of all merit and dignity in the subject, and of all obligation in the person that shows it.

Repentance in order of nature is before pardon, but they are inseparably joined in the same point of time. David in Psalm xxxii is an instance.

The repenting sinner who is under the strong conviction of his guilt, and his being always obnoxious to the judgment of God and eternal misery, the consequences of it, values the favor of God as the most sovereign good, and accounts his displeasure as the supreme evil. Repentance inspires flaming affections, in our prayers and praises for pardon. The sinner is obliged to suffer the punishment of his evil deeds in his own person, therefore it is clear, that the punishment cannot be transferred to another without the allowance of the sovereign, who is the patron of the rights of justice. There is a judicial exchange of persons between Christ and believers, their guilt is transferred to him and his righteousness is imputed to them."—*Bates*.

## 2. Each act of forgiveness is a discretionary act of supremacy.

“God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy,” yet, though forgiveness flows from his gracious nature it does not follow that he will pardon every one. For he saith to Moses, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.” So Paul—“Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved.” Ep. i: 5, 6. There is, in each case, as it arises, a special interposition of his will. He is at liberty to exercise his grace or not, as seems good in his sight. He chooses the subjects towards whom he extends the sceptre of mercy. Besides, since pardon must be bestowed at the discretion of some one or more, being an act above law, we ask at whose discretion can it safely lie? The majesty of the law—the glory of the Most High and the stability of the government, working the happiness of countless multitudes, are all concerned in its exercise. Who but Jehovah is sufficient for these things? Whose will would here afford any guaranty against sudden and sure destruction? If there be a prerogative which from its nature must inhere in the sovereign, surely this must be that prerogative. True, he has promised forgiveness to every believing sinner, and here in he has relaxed his severity. But he has done so, only to magnify his sovereignty, for the promise to which he has bound himself is the gift of his grace. “For ye are saved by grace, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God.” “The wages of sin is death.” Thus he still exercises his pleasure, and at his discretion alone is pardon bestowed.

## 3. Forgiveness is the most amiable act of supremacy.

The pardon of sin is beyond all doubt the most precious boon that can be bestowed on a sinner. It rolls back the sentence of the law, lifts off from his soul the overwhelming burden of guilt and lights up his pathway with joy and peace unutterable. It dissipates the sorrows of death and mitigates the pains of hell, and in their place fills the mouth with the song of praise. No blessedness like this to a sinner—compared with it, his creation may be forgotten, for without it, that creation were a curse.—When then the sovereign dispenses it, he presents himself to the

view of his subjects in the most endearing light. Touched with pity for the misery of his sinful creature, and unwilling that he should perish—he stretches out to the sinner at his feet his sceptre of mercy and bids him live—live forever. What can more endear him to his fallen creature? Can such a display fail to touch the springs of any generous bosom? Will not the sinner be bound to him by the strongest ties? Can he ever forget it, that he sought and found pardon? Will he not forget the hand that created him in his own glory, in love and admiration of the hand that pardoned him?—Who can doubt it?

4. Forgiveness in each act necessarily implies the exercise of Omniscience.

The penalty of the law varies both in kind and degree, in proportion to the heinousness as well as the number of the sins committed. “And that servant that knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required, and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”

In order then to the adjustment of the penalty to the offence, it is necessary to estimate properly the heinousness as well as know precisely the number of transgressions. Again, the heinousness of sin is affected by all the circumstances attendant on it, among which not the least important is the state of the sinner’s mind. To estimate it, accordingly, requires a thorough acquaintance with all their transgressions, especially with the heart of the individual.

Now since forgiveness is the entire removal of all guilt or legal liability to punishment, and punishment is proportioned to the number and nature and aggravation of sins, its exercise presupposes and demands a perfect knowledge in this respect. He who dispenses it, must in an especial manner, be able to fathom the heart, to know the thoughts and feelings and purposes of the sinner’s mind—to give the three their relative place and weight among all the other aggravating or modifying circumstances, which go to make up the aggregate of his guilt. Indeed, he must search the heart and try the reins

of the children of men. If he does not possess all this knowledge, he may fail to set aside the claims of the law in their full extent, which remaining still on the head of the sinner, must bring him to punishment, i. e. he is not forgiven.

But the scriptures explicitly assert that this kind of knowledge belongs to the Omniscient one alone. God claims it as his sole prerogative to search the hearts, so as to intimate guilt and to apportion to each one the punishment due to his sins. Hear his own language—"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, who can know it?"

"I the Lord, search the hearts, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways and according to the fruit of his doings."

The same knowledge is claimed by Jesus as the Eternal Son of God, "and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts; and I will give unto every one of you according to his works."

It follows therefore that the exercise of forgiveness must always be attended with that of Omniscience.

5. Forgiveness in each act also implies the exercise of Omnipotence.

The pardon of sin, which in itself simply denotes a change of relation, is in the plan of salvation revealed in the Gospel inseparably connected with a radical change of character. He, whose sins are forgiven is a believer—"To him, i. e., Jesus, gave all the prophets witness, that through his name, whosoever believeth on him, shall receive remission of sins."

Besides, forgiveness is always associated in the Scriptures with repentance. Thus our Lord told his disciples, "That repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name, beginning at Jerusalem." This we imagine will not be questioned for a moment. And if so, it follows that the forgiveness of sins must be associated with the exercise of the power to give faith and repentance. So in fact, Peter represented it to the Jewish council, when, speaking of Jesus, he said, "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour for to give repentance to Israel and the remission of sins."

And without this power it is obvious that the power of forgiveness would be a nullity.

But repentance and faith are the points of that change in the heart which the Scriptures denote by the terms creation, resurrection, a new birth, the taking away of the heart of stone and giving a heart of flesh. Such terms, if they have any meaning, must denote such an exertion of power in producing this change, as is implied necessarily in bringing all things at first out of nothing, or in raising the dead or in infusing life into an inanimate mass. And who can doubt that these are in our view among the most unequivocal acts of Omnipotence? Who doubts that the power which creates, which calls the dead from the deep slumber of the tomb, which brings on the stage of life thousands who before existed not, is the putting forth of the Almighty arm? All this is necessary to convey the precious boon of forgiveness to sinners, and hence the act of forgiveness must be associated with Omnipotence, or it is nothing worth.

#### II.—THE POWER TO FORGIVE SINS.

From this view of the act of forgiveness, it is not difficult to discern the nature of the forgiving power. This is the source whence these acts proceed. Each act of forgiveness is but an exercise—an efflux of the power to forgive. The acts of forgiveness are the streams—the power to forgive is the fountain—and from the streams we may go up to the fountain.

If then, these acts, as we have seen, are acts of supremacy—and special discretionary acts of supremacy, and the most amiable acts of supremacy—if, moreover, these acts involve the exercise, both of omniscience and omnipotence, then is it manifest that the power of which they are but the mere exercises, must not only be a branch of the supreme power—but of that supreme power in its most distinctive aspect: God as invested with it, enrobes himself in the vestments of his high sovereignty, and comes forth to the view of all his creatures in the most awful and imposing manner—putting his hand on the head of a poor sinner, turning aside from his head the just sentence of his holy law, and sending him forth big with hope on the pathway of life and glory and immortality. Never is he so much an Almighty Sovereign, shining forth in his peerless majesty to our view, as at such a moment and in such an act. Never does he tower so far above all the creatures of his hands, and leave at such an im-

measurable distance below him, Gabriel, Michael, and all the lofty ones who burn and shine around his eternal throne—as when he says to the poor condemned ruined sinner, “Thy sins are forgiven thee, arise and go in peace.” Then His authority rises above the law, and then is he seen holding in his hands the eternal destiny of the fallen children of Adam.

And such being the nature of this power, how can we avoid the conclusion that *He only can forgive sins*—that he reserves it entirely in his own hands—that he will not, that he cannot intrust it to any creature. If there be a power inseparable from his Godhead—one in which, more than in any other, he appears to us as the blessed and only Potentate—the Independent Sovereign, wielding the eternal destiny of his creatures—it must be this. If the exercise of this power—which is an exercise of sovereignty, involving both Omniscience and Omnipotence, does not define the *Eternal I Am* to our view—then may we utterly despair of ever being able to distinguish him from his creatures, and live in constant dread of rendering to a finite being that homage which is due to the Infinite One, and consequently, of incurring his heaviest displeasure. But no, this cannot be. To forgive, is the prerogative of Jehovah—a right which he enjoys alone—a right belonging to *Him* in contradistinction to those which belong to his creatures. “I, even I, am *He* that blotteth out thy transgressions for my name sake.”

This is the flower of his crown—will he pluck it out and give it to another? It is his crown itself—will he take it off and put it on another’s head? Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Thou shalt be over my house, according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled; only in the throne will I be greater than thou.” But to bestow the power of forgiving sins on a creature, would be to do more than Pharaoh did to Joseph. It would be to put the crown on his head, and make him greater in the throne than Jehovah. It would be to reserve no greater power to himself.—And will God give his glory to another? Besides, should he be willing to give his crown to another—what head could wear it? Could Gabriel? “Could he read the heart and try the reins?” Could he new create the soul? Could he dispose of seats in glory? No! beneath such a load, he would bow down—sink—be crushed, aye, annihilated. The sceptre then, which extends mer-



cy to the sinner, in the forgiveness of his sins, is the sceptre to which all heaven bows, and at which all hell quakes. We need not fear to fall down before Him who stretches it out to us, and worship Him as the Lord God Almighty, which liveth and reigneth forever.

A.—EXAMINATIONS OF THE PRETENSIONS TO THIS POWER.

We think we have established our point, and shown the power under consideration to be in its very nature to be inalienable. It now only remains that we make a practical application of the principles involved in the foregoing discussion, by making use of them to examine the pretensions which have been put forth to the possession and exercise of this power. These pretensions, must in order to any appearance of validity, be based on the assumption that this power is delegated, or, that the power still residing in God, is exercised through or in connexion with the agency of certain individuals. The former is the ground on which the church of Rome rests her bold claims, and shuts the kingdom of heaven against all who will not bow to her dictats. The other is that preferred by high churchmen, who, fearful of proceeding all the length of the Mother of abominations, are yet desirous of retaining in their creed this dogma as far as possible, in order to impart dignity and importance to the ministry. Let us, then, examine the views of both parties, and see how far they are sustained in them by Scripture and reason.

1. Is this power ever delegated to any finite being?

This question, it would seem, might easily be answered from a right view of the nature of the power. This has been the burden of all our preceding discussion. We have seen that it is according to Bacon's distinction, a branch of that absolute prerogative which resides in the Godhead, according to his private will and judgment. We have seen, further, that its effect in every case, necessarily implies the presence of Omnipotence and Omniscience. On both these grounds, we have declared it to be incommunicable—incapable of being transferred to any mere creature, and therefore is not delegated to any such, because it cannot be. But let us suppose for a moment that such a thing were possible, what would be the necessary result? Would not that being become *ipso facto* supreme? Supreme power delegated,

renders him to whom it is delegated, supreme. Omniscience delegated, if such a thing be conceivable, invests the individual with a power to know all things. Delegated omnipotence is omnipotence still. And can such powers reside in a creature? Is not the Supreme one God over all, blessed forever? Does not the exercise of omniscience and omnipotence, flowing from a power resident in Him mark out the High and Holy One, whom all are bound to adore. If not, how shall he ever claim our allegiance in any manifestation he may or can make of himself. The absurdity of this conclusion shows the falsity of the supposition.

But we will here be confronted by the passage in John xx : 23, in which this power is expressly said to be bestowed on the Apostles. This text will come more fully under consideration in a subsequent part of this discourse. For the present, it may suffice to say, that while we admit such to be its most obvious meaning, yet an interpretation so much at variance with the views every where advanced in the Scriptures, and so inconsistent with right reason, cannot be sustained unless it can be shown to be the only one of which the passage is susceptible. And that this language may be otherwise understood, is evident from the fact that a great multitude of pious and learned men have so understood it.

## II.—IS THIS POWER EXERCISED THROUGH HUMAN AGENCY ?

This view seems, at first, to be free from all the objections arising from the nature of the power as inalienable, admitting that God only can forgive sins, and claiming simply that he exercises it in connexion with human instrumentality—while therefore it apparently shields its advocates from the danger and guilt involved in those daring pretensions, it leaves them certainly in the same condition to all practical purposes; for so long as pardon can come only through the ministry, our souls are in their hands. This point, accordingly, demands a careful examination. And the more so, too, because this view, it is contended, is supported by many examples in the Old and New Testament. Thus, we read that Moses laid his hands on Joshua, and the spirit of wisdom came down on him. But it should be noticed that Moses acted in accordance with a special revelation of God's will

“And the Lord said unto Moses, take thee Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay thine hands on him. And thou shalt put some of thine honor on him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient.”—Again Ananias was sent to Saul in Damascus, that he might receive his sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost. But Ananias, too, acted in obedience to a special disclosure of God’s will made to him, and this fact he declared to Saul at the time, and so in all similar cases. Now, this special revelation we regard as essentially necessary. For how otherwise would it be possible for the ministry to know when and where, and towards whom, God would be pleased to put forth his pardoning mercy? Or how would the individual to whom the minister was sent know that his sins were forgiven? The only ground of assurance would be the word of a man, a ground utterly insufficient, unless he proved himself to be a messenger from God. A revelation from God would be all that was requisite, but it is indispensable. Each case, as it arises, would demand a special disclosure, and thus the minister would need to receive constantly, new revelations of the mind of God. But, so far as we know, this special privilege is not claimed by those with whom we are now at issue. They make no pretensions to new light from above, or to plenary inspiration. They are accordingly constrained to abandon this position, if they are ready to submit to sound argument.

But, perhaps, we may be told that there is no need of a special revelation, a general one is all that is sufficient; and that is given us in the sure word of God, which liveth and abideth forever. If this can be shown, we are ready to submit without any further debate. Before, however, proceeding to examine the Scripture passages supposed to maintain their views, let us inquire what is meant by this general revelation, or by a general revelation authorising the belief that God exercises this power through or in connexion with a specified human agency. If this were so, then God, otherwise at liberty to pardon whom he pleases, binds himself to exercise his prerogative only through a certain mediation; of course he is no longer free to exercise his pleasure in each case. Pardon is no more according to his private will and judgment. The will of man becomes essentially necessary, and thus his declaration to Moses no longer remains true: “I will be gra-

cious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Ex. xxxiii, 19; because God has bound himself to exercise his will in every case in which these, his appointed instruments, are pleased to exercise theirs. It is not, then, according to God's good pleasure, but according to that of the ministry. Their discretion regulates the course of procedure. And is not this to all practical purposes, an assumption of this power? Is there not a delegation of it to the ministry? And, accordingly, does not this opinion lie open to all the objections we have raised against the first opinion? Most assuredly it does, in our judgment, and we can see in this belief, nothing more than an attempt to escape these objections in theory while they still retain all their force in practice. We regard, then, such a binding himself up, in the exercise of this prerogative, as utterly inconsistent with its nature, and impossible in the nature of the case. But our opponents here say all this reasoning is set aside by the plain declarations of Scripture, such passages as John xx: 23: "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."\*

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\* "The Holy Catholic Church hath in all ages, referred to this passage as a commission to the most important spiritual functions. It was ever understood to mean what its language literally imports. It is the explicit sense of our church that the power of remission and retention is as permanent as the ministry, and is an essential prerogative of the sacerdotal office. Wherever remission of sins is spoken of, we attach but one idea to the expression.—*Dr. Curtis' Sermon*, pp. 5, 6.

#### *Nature of the power to forgive as thus bestowed on the Ministry.*

This is not an independent or intrinsic power, \* \* \* \*. Such power belongs to God alone. It must, therefore, be a ministerial or instrumental power. God having appointed an order of men in the world to accomplish his gracious purposes of mercy to mankind, makes them his agents in conferring the blessings which he has in store for them. He has *entrusted to them certain powers*, whose proper exercise he has engaged to ratify.

The ambassador of an earthly monarch, in treating with revolted subjects, may be invested with the power of settling the conditions of reconciliation, as well as of promising to all who will submit to them. Although the original source of pardon and its final ratification are with the sovereign, yet, if his agent or minister has kept by the articles furnished him, he has so far, acted in place of his sovereign, who will ratify and confirm the acts of his minister, as much as if done by himself. \* \* \* Through the ministry as the agent and instrument, are conferred all these benefits which are implied in the ordinances. These, when rightly administered, and duly received, are as effective of their purpose, as if administered by the independent or supreme power. \* \* \* \* (This is all pretty well; our friend has his eyes open while speaking directly on the nature of this power, but as we shall see, he waxes bolder and bolder as he proceeds.)

Matthew xviii, 18: "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." Matt. xvi, 19: "And I will give unto thee (i. e. Peter) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Before proceeding to the consideration of these passages, it may be well to remember the purpose for which they are introduced by our opponents—not to prove that this power is delegated to the ministry—this is repudiated; but to show that God limits his own exercise of it by the discretion of a regularly authorized ministry. This is all we have to do with this. Our business is simply to show that they cannot be brought forward to substantiate such a view.

It is contended that these three passages contain the same idea, which is most clearly, because literally, expressed by John, and therefore are to be interpreted by it. If so, i. e., if we are to take the language of John in its most obvious and literal sense, then it explicitly teaches that the Apostles were endowed with the plenary power of forgiveness at discretion.

Now this, in the eyes of our opponents is very different from the idea that God made use of them and now makes use of the Christian ministry as a special mediation through which he dispenses pardon. And it will not do to meet all the formidable objections which are raised to the grant of any such power to

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\* \* \* And hence, it may be urged, of what special and positive value is a ministry if its service be only of incidental benefit, such as not ensues from the sober action of any man whatever, and not of an appointed and certain efficacy; one to which mankind, encouraged and fortified by the promises of God, can confidently resort as the divinely authorised agent for dispensing grace to the soul. (The power for which Dr. C. contends then, whatever may be its nature, must be such as to engender in an intelligent mind the conviction, that the ministers in whom it resides, or through whom it flows, are so authorised to dispense pardon, that their declaration is an infallible ground of assurance of pardon.) If the ministry be an appointed office, it must have an authority and efficiency, which does not belong to those who are not invested with it. This authority, though delegated, is competent to all the purposes for which it was bestowed, and when actually given, is as efficient to its end as though it were original and independent. A true authority implies either an inherent or accompanying power, which is competent to all the purposes for which it is held. And, although a delegated authority implies a derived and limited power, yet that power is in its effects precisely the same as if original or exercised by the supreme power.—*Dr. Curtis' Sermon, p. 9, 11, 12.*

the ministry, by saying that all that is meant is, that God makes use of them as the appointed channel through which he himself conveys pardon, and then appeal to these passages in proof of the doctrine as thus explained. Their literal import is that the apostles were impowered to forgive sins at their discretion—and only in proof of such a pretence can they in their literal view be fairly urged. They may thus be quoted by the advocates of the claims of the Romish church, and are thus often appealed to in defence of their claims—but none who are not prepared to go all the length of these followers of the Man of sin have any right to appeal to them. Our reply to them has already been given. But those with whom we are at issue now disclaim such views. These contend merely that the ministry are the agents or instruments through whom the benefit of forgiveness is bestowed. Such is not the literal import of the passages above cited, which are consequently of no avail to establish these views.

We remark further, that whatever may be the power here granted, it cannot be proven to have been granted to the apostles exclusively. It is clear from John that the occasion on which these words were spoken was on the evening of our Lord's resurrection—when the disciples were gathered together in Jerusalem with closed doors for fear of the Jews. John tells us that the disciples were present and were the persons addressed, "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my father hath sent me even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost; whosoever sins ye remit," &c. Now Luke (24: 33) tells us, in speaking of the same occasion, who these disciples were—they were not only the eleven apostles, but they that were with them—i. e., all the disciples—so that the power here granted was not granted exclusively to the ministry, but given to all the disciples. The passage then can with no show of fairness be alleged in proof of any special power conferred on the Romish ministry.

Once more—granting that the apostles were the individuals here addressed, though other disciples were present, and that to them alone was this power given. Yet since this power is granted or promised in immediate connexion with the conferring of the Holy Ghost significantly alluded to by our Lord's breathing on them. it cannot be shown that it was not granted to them as

inspired men and that none possess it but those who have such supernatural gifts. On such a supposition, we see no difficulty in the exercise of such a power on their part. For being endowed with the power of discerning spirits, they could infallibly distinguish such as were real penitents and believers, and their authoritative declaration based on this knowledge would be only an annunciation of what God had already done. It would in reality be no more than a declaration to others of a disclosure of the exercise of the power of forgiveness on the part of God made to them by the direct communication of the Spirit. But such a grant as this avails nothing to advance the claims of such as now pretend to exercise the power of forgiveness, unless they can show themselves inspired men. So that the text viewed in all its meanings, in no one of them answers the purpose for which it has so often and so exultingly been quoted. And this being the main and sole prop of this dogma, we are warranted to conclude that there is no revelation made in the Scriptures of any purpose of God to confer pardon through the ministry as a special mediation. None in which they are warranted to say to a sinner, thy sins are forgiven thee, and this declaration thereby be an evidence that his sins are really forgiven.

But we contend further, that the pretensions, which men set up to the power on earth to forgive sins are not only false, but blasphemous. That these pretensions put forth in any form are high, their advocates candidly acknowledge. It is for the avowed purpose of investing themselves and the ministry in general with a great degree of authority, and giving themselves elevation in the eyes of the church, that they are put forth. They are, however, in our view, not only high and arrogant, but blasphemous.

If the conclusion reached in the foregoing discussion be correct, then it has been shown that the claims advanced are such as if true, demand at the hands of all, the reverence and homage due to the supreme and Mighty One. They are claims of the possession of the highest prerogative of supremacy, and of attributes which cannot inhere in a finite being. If these claims however, are false, which on principles laid down is obviously so, then those who make them must be under the serious charge of a bold assumption of the prerogative of God. These men attempt to mount up and occupy the throne of God and profes-

sing to be seated there, they call on others to confess their sins unto them in order to forgiveness. Pretending that they sit upon the throne of grace, they invite us to come boldly to them that we may obtain mercy and find grace in time of need. And alas! how many thousands and myriads of poor ignorant deluded souls are led away by their craft. If any one more wise say to one of such pretenders, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" is there one, a single one of them, that can say to a palsied man, "Arise, take up thy bed and go unto thine house," and the palsied man will arise and do so? Is there one who can substantiate his claims to the authority to forgive sins on earth, by such or a similar faith? Jesus did not hesitate to do so—to show his authority; and surely since the servant is not above his Lord, his legitimate successors should not hesitate to follow his example.

But we repeat it, is there one that can or will do it. If so, where is he? Let him come forward and produce his strong claims. Till then we may be pardoned for replying to one and all of such claimants, "Jesus we know, Paul we know, but who are ye?"

Did I ask who are they? Did I inquire who are such as pretend to say to a poor sinner, thy sins are forgiven thee and expect that it will be even so according to their declaration? Why need I ask a question answered long ago, to guard us if possible against the danger of ignorance on this point? Look at 2nd Thess. II. We read of that man of sin, the son of perdition, who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that which is worshipped, so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God showing himself that he is God." Can we fail to recognize in these features the likeness of these pretenders? Could description be more accurate in its main points? Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped? Is not this precisely what we have proved to be the amount of their pretensions? Have we not shown that they exalt themselves to supremacy in its highest and most distinctive exercise? So that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Have we not also shown that they show themselves to be God, by their calling on men to seek forgiveness at their hands, occupying places of trust and honor in the church on earth.



We therefore conclude that these men are guilty of blasphemy. Does such a conclusion startle us? Do we shrink back and pause before we can be persuaded that men could be carried so far in their zeal to maintain their influence and increase their authority? Why should we? Has not the apostle accounted for it? He declares that they are given up to strong delusion, to believe a lie that they may all be damned, and this because they believed not the truth, but take pleasure in unrighteousness.

Those given up to judicial blindness, may proceed to any length in the way of iniquity and absurdity. And surely it is reasonable to suppose there is no sin which God would be more ready to punish with an unsparing hand than that which makes so bold an onset on his dearest prerogative—as one which would pluck the flower from his crown.

The force of these remarks is not at all weakened by the reply that the power claimed is only conditionally effective. If by this it were meant that the ministry possessed only the power of declaring the sins of the true penitent forgiven, then all objections to its exercise would be obviated. But that such is not the meaning we are to attach to these terms, is obvious from the consideration that this is our authority, which every one with the Scriptures in his hands, is at liberty to exercise. The Scriptures declare in the plainest terms that he who repents is forgiven. Any one, then, who reads and understands, can declare upon the authority of God, that if an individual is a true penitent, his sins are forgiven. This, however, is not a power which satisfies such claimants. It does not invest the ministry with any peculiar authority above others, and consequently, does not answer the purpose for which such pretensions are made. The conditional effectiveness thus turns out on examination to be without a condition, i. e. a real and unconditional effectiveness. The reply is accordingly a mere evasion, and the charge stands unreputed.

But it becomes not only those who advance such claims, but those who are disposed to hearken to them, to beware.—They are so high, so daring, so far above all claims, ordinarily set up by men—they are moreover so opposed to all proper views of Scripture, so derogatory to God, and so degrading to man—that there must be guilt in entertaining them for a moment.—

The poison is so violent, that the slightest quantity is fatal. The pretensions should at once be resisted, and every good and true man is bound to show their fallacy and impiety.

Finally, while we deny this prerogative to any mere man or finite being, we cheerfully acknowledge it as belonging to Jesus. We claim it for him at the hands of all others. The Son of Man hath power on earth to *forgive sins*. High and sacred as is this prerogative, it is not too much so for Him. He is the Son of God—the brightness of the Father's glory, and the express image of his person. He is clothed with every divine perfection, because possessed of a divine nature. In this wonderful person, then, this Jesus of Nazareth, this God and man in two distinct natures and one person, we see one able to receive and wield this power. Besides, as the one Mediator between God and man, he has purchased by his obedience unto death, the right to give eternal life to as many as he will. It is his righteousness which makes the sinner just. It is his blood which delivereth from all sins, his death which stands in the stead of the sinner. He assumed our relation to the law, and all our legal responsibilities rests on him. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree, and cancelled the guilt of every believer.

The Father has accepted him, and all power in heaven and earth is given unto him. We may well, therefore, concede to his claims. If they are controverted, he can easily substantiate them by the exhibition of these very divine attributes necessary to the exercise of the power. So he did on the occasion alluded to in our text. He read the thoughts of the heart. "Why reason ye thus in your heart." He displayed his omnipotence.—Arise, said he to the palsied man, take up thy bed and go unto thine house; and he arose and departed to his house. By an effect, which was palpable to all, he showed that he could produce another of equal difficulty—though not discernible to others. His pretensions, therefore, were not false—his claims were valid. All must know that he had power on earth to forgive sins.

Let us then, my friends, as poor sinners, come to Jesus for pardon. Let us receive our forgiveness at His hands. Those that would stand between us and him, and proffer to us their aid in securing forgiveness, let us thrust aside and refuse their aid. Let us know that while Jesus can forgive, none other can. Then let us cry with broken hearts to Him, and learn from experience that Jesus has power on earth to forgive sins.

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